



**Meg Heubeck is director of instruction for the Center for Politics' Youth Leadership Initiative at University of Virginia. She works with teachers nationally to help students respectfully deal with the divides of our society through civil discourse, debate and compromise.**

JARRAD HENDERSON/USA TODAY

## **I am an American We Are One Nation** **TEACHING OUR KIDS CIVIL DISCOURSE**

A small effort to cultivate conversations to help heal an election-fractured nation radiates from a center in Virginia

### **GABE CAVALLARO**

USA TODAY NETWORK - January 1, 2017

*As Americans, we are a diverse population. Historically, we have embraced that diversity as what brings us together and truly makes us one nation encouraging all to seek life, liberty and happiness. By sharing our individual differences and finding commonalities, we can work to unify the nation. One thing unites us: We are all Americans. Each week, this series will introduce you to an exceptional American who is making a difference to unite, rather than divide, our communities.*

CHARLOTTESVILLE, Va.

On the campus of Thomas Jefferson's university and in the shadow of his home, Monticello, former social studies teacher Meg Heubeck channels the founding father who sought to unify a nation after a nasty, corrosive election in 1800.

Heubeck wants to resurrect civil discourse. She and her small project aim for a more cooperative America by focusing on those who have yet to vote.

Heubeck, 48, represents the many quiet leaders that the USA TODAY Network will profile throughout 2017 in the wake of the divisive presidential election. She's an American taking real strides to make civic conversation comfortable again.

"We're Americans — that's the thing that holds us together," she says. "Politics shouldn't be something you lose friends and family over."

She has connected with 70,000 teachers across the country as director of instruction for the Youth Leadership Initiative at the University of Virginia Center for Politics, giving them full lesson plans. In one, students play a board game that forces them to understand the compromises it took to write the Constitution. Another uses a mock election and e-Congress simulations to model what actually happens in Congress.

It's meant to prepare students to be lifelong citizens and constructive participants in American democracy. "Discussion, debate and compromise — everything we do has an element of that," Heubeck says. She learned that lesson as a social studies teacher for 12 years in low-income areas of Baltimore and again in travels to post-civil war Sri Lanka in 2009 and to Afghanistan in 2011. She says that sense of "them" and "us" — tribalism really — that she so often hears was a key determiner in 2016's schismatic course.

"You have to make a choice whether to engage or isolate, and I've made a choice to engage, to inspire other people because I see what it's done for me," says Heubeck, who grew up in Jarrettsville, Maryland, with a father who taught at risk students.

She's also teaching her 10-year-old son, Remmer, to understand different points of view. The earlier educators can teach children about the American political and civic system and help them understand the election process, the more likely they are to participate later, says Larry Sabato, director of the Center for Politics.

The Youth Leadership materials are available for children as young as kindergarten age. Elementary school teachers can register online and access all the materials for free.

Heubeck's election resources have been used by Julie Strong, a social studies teacher at Albemarle High School in Virginia. Seniors in Strong's AP Government class developed a better understanding of the political processes before casting their first ballots as new adults.

"We try to put everything in one spot so teachers can find it," says Heubeck, who joined the program in 2004. The program is operated by a mish-mosh of state funds, donations, partnerships, word-of mouth and unpaid interns.

The next step for concerned citizens, Heubeck says, is to get involved: "We can't cry and hide in the basement. We've got to do something and have that faith in one another."

## Q&A WITH MEG HEUBECK

### What it means to be an American

Meg Heubeck of Waynesboro, Virginia, leads instruction projects for the Youth Leadership Initiative at the University of Virginia's Center for Politics. The daughter of a teacher and a social worker, she grew up in the suburbs of Baltimore and later spent 12 years as a teacher herself.

#### **What does it mean to you to be an American?**

It means that you have the ability to change things. It means that you have the power to make the country what you want it to be. It means the freedom to vote without worrying about going to jail. It means being able to discuss the challenges we face without fearing legal repercussions.

#### **What moment touched and motivated you to launch this effort?**

The exact moment was when I heard one of my colleagues saying their family wasn't talking to each other at Thanksgiving because of the election. I had been working on this topic since the summer, but that's the instant I realized I had to do something. It's going to be really serious business. I want to start rebuilding those relationships. Let's start now.

#### **What gives you hope or what concerns you?**

We've been through this before in American history. We've had elections that have been tumultuous. We've had candidates who have been unusual, like Andrew Jackson. The way our government is set up protects us from the volatility of strong personalities. We will be OK. But one thing that gives me concern is the sectionalism between the regions of America that don't talk and don't share experiences. It could cause a rift if we don't do something about it.

#### **What do you hope to accomplish through your efforts?**

I hope to bring back a spirit of discourse, debate and compromise that I think is missing. We can do that through civic education and working with students. I think that makes our democracy a lot stronger.... These are required skills for the 21st century. I want them to internalize that they can make a difference. We need an increase in voter turnout among young people. That would be fabulous. And more young people running for office!

*William Ramsey*